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## ***Et Amicorum*: Reading In Bed or Reading with Friends?**

Reading was rarely a solitary experience in early modern Europe. Even when people read alone, they often shared their books – covered with their annotations – with friends, family and colleagues. In this way, the most private and solitary experience, reading alone with a book in bed, became part of a wider conversation. The Communities of Print project explores this shared use of books and the role that books played in creating communities - real and imagined - in early modern England.

### **Reading with Friends**

People read with, and for, their friends. And the marks of this reading can be seen in all kinds of ways in early modern books. One of the best known examples is the inscription, 'et amicorum' ('and of friends') which humanist scholars often wrote in the front of their books along with their name. It signalled the extent to which learning and reading was a collective endeavour. Gabriel Harvey, an Elizabethan scholar, wrote 'et amicorum' his copy of Livy's *History* along with marginal notes that recorded repeated, sometimes collaborative, readings. In one marginal note Harvey recorded that he 'privately discussed these three books of Livy' with Sir Philip Sidney 'just before his embassy to the emperor Rudolf II'. While Harvey recorded conversations arising from his reading, more usually we find evidence of a solitary reader imagining a future conversation with friends or colleagues.

Even the most solitary reading could be conducted with others in mind. Montaigne caricatured an indecisive judge reading late into the night. 'When he met with any sharp conflict' Montaigne recorded, he 'was wont to write in the margin of his book, *a question for a friend*'.<sup>1</sup> And we can see that the private reading that often took place in the bedchamber was – despite its solitude - conducted with others in mind.

### **Reading in Bed**

Tobie Matthew (c. 1544 – 1628), Archbishop of York (1606-1628) was an avid reader and dedicated book collector. Matthew believed that sermons were at the heart of Protestant spirituality and read widely to make his sermons as up to date and as effective as possible. In 1612, Matthew warned a group of newly ordained ministers that 'preachers should be taken from solitary studies and *not* out of taverns to testify'<sup>2</sup>. And Matthew led by example. He had a collection of around 3000 volumes, which he spread around his archiepiscopal palaces in the Northern province.

Matthew kept most of his books in his bedrooms in Bishopthorpe and Cawood palaces (both were outside York). Large bookcases - a relatively new innovation - were installed in the bedroom, while he tended to reserve his study

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Montaigne, *Essays*, (tr). John Florio (London, 1613). p. 339

<sup>2</sup> Bod Add MS A 89 f. 153r.

for the day-to-day papers of Church government. It seems that Matthew, who had many rooms to choose from, chose to read mainly in the privacy of his bedchamber.

It was a fairly common practice in early modern England. Men and women read in bed to wind down before going to sleep. People also read between first and second sleep – the period of wakefulness in the middle of the night – and so it was handy to have treasured or familiar books close to hand, with godly works a firm favourite to ward away any dark thoughts of the night.

More ‘professional’ reading took place in the bedchamber too. The bedroom was an excellent place to catch up on serious reading away from the bustle of everyday life in a large household. The Jacobean writer, John Favour, was a preacher, a local magistrate and a doctor. Bedtime was the one time he found the peace he needed to do the background reading for his own books. He noted that ‘the night hath afforded me that which the day would not allow me: the silence and quiet whereof, hath ministred much matter and meane to further my meditations’.<sup>3</sup>

Reading was an active pastime, with readers annotating their books as a way to absorb and digest the text. Tobie Matthew made a note in one of his notebooks that: ‘reading makes a full man, conference a ready man, writing an exact man’.<sup>4</sup> The writing he referred to here were the marginal notes and comments he covered his books with. Matthew had a table installed in his bedroom that was covered with green fabric to help him read late into the night. It was here he annotated, digested and glossed much of his library – from light hearted pamphlets to books of dense theology. Like John Favour, Matthew seems to have been seeking out the solitude of his bedroom to quietly engage with his texts.

### **Reading Alone or Reading Together?**

Although the bulk of Matthew’s reading was a solitary endeavour, Matthew read for a larger audience, making notes and annotations that were designed to be used by others. Matthew took his role as an educator seriously, and we can see that this spilled into his reading as he digested and glossed sometimes complicated texts for his chaplains and friends.

Evidence of this comes from the Protestant clerics who used Matthew’s library to produce polemics defending the Church of England. Matthew persuaded the Leeds Puritan minister, Alexander Cooke, to write a history proving that Pope Joan had existed. He compiled this scurilous history using annotations and notes in Matthew’s books. John Favour also started his writing career with Matthew’s help, praising Matthew’s ‘judicious’ annotations guided Favour through an enormous pile of patristic texts.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John Favour, *Antiquitie Triumphant over Novelty* (1619) dedicatory epistle

<sup>4</sup> Bod Add MS A 89

<sup>5</sup> John Favour, *Antiquitie Triumphant over Novelty* (1619) dedicatory epistle

The personal encounter with the written word was a powerful experience for Protestants, but it was often part of a larger conversation. Matthew's reading was almost always conducted with other people in mind and so even though he may have retreated to the privacy of his bedchamber to read, the effect of his reading were felt far beyond the walls of his palaces.

You can read more about Matthew's reading in the forthcoming: *Moderate Radical: Tobie Matthew and the English Reformation* (Oxford University Press, March 2018)